I t is now three years since the po-
lice gunned down 34 mine work-
kers in Marikana, a mining area that
is situated along the platinum belt in
the Northwest province of South Af-
rica. This incident took place against
the backdrop of mounting hostilities,
initially triggered by strikes over low
wages. This was also punctuated by
violent tensions between two rival
unions – the National Union of Mine-
workers (NUM), which is an affiliate
of the Congress of South African Work-
ers (COSATU), an ANC-aligned feder-
ation; and the Association of Mine Workers
and Construction Union (AMCU), an
independent and radical union whose
leader had broken away from NUM. The
employer – Lonmin Mining (or Lonmin in short) – boasted as one of
its shareholders a leading figure of the
ruling African National Congress and
locally South Africa’s deputy Presi-
dent, Cyril Ramaphosa. An important
detail is the fact that Ramaphosa was
once General Secretary of NUM. While
Ramaphosa and senior state officials
were exonerated by a commission of
inquiry that was appointed by Presi-
dent Jacob Zuma to conduct an inves-
tigation into developments around the
Marikana massacre, many questions
regarding the line of authority to under-
take such a large-scale violence remain
answered. What is clear, and this is
the point made towards the end of the
book under review, is that the ruling
ANC has been unhinged from its
intimate links with the poor and down-
trodden. The interests of its leaders
and factions that are drawing benefits
from business links have taken centre stage.

The tragic events of Marikana cast
a gloomy cloud over South Africa. It
drowned the innocence and idealism
that was brought about by the first
democratic elections in 1994 with the unveiling
of a new constitution with a Bill of Rights
in 1996. The values that the ANC once
professed are no longer the guiding
communis of its governance. It is worth
pointing out that the Marikana incident
was by no means an isolated one; but
it was the first that witnessed vicious
state-sanctioned violence unleashed
upon workers who were voicing their
grievances for higher wages. Mine
workers in South Africa still live under
wretched conditions and earn a pitance
in comparison with workers in other
mining jurisdictions, while mine bosses
pay themselves extravagant bonuses.

At any given month in South Africa,
there are various demonstrations of dissent
by a populace that has become used to
the poor state of public service delivery,
rising corruption, and underperformance
of local government authorities and other
state agencies. Social tensions have been
compounded by the sluggish growth of
the economy (at 2% or below in the past
three years), with levels of inequality
unparalleled in the history of the country.
South Africa is currently the most unequal
country in the world.

The South Africa of today is not the
South Africa that was characterised by
boundless optimism in 1994. There is
a feeling that ordinary citizens occupy
a secondary place to those who are
politically connected and have found a
way of using their political credentials
to climb the social ladder either through
parliamentary channels or through the Black
Economic Empowerment (BEE) scheme.

John Saul and Patrick Bond bring all of this under
intense scrutiny. They offer a critical
observation of how the governing elites in
South Africa have veered off course and abandoned
the values they professed in the early 1990s. This is
not a book that deals with abstract ideas, although it
is suffused with scholarship. Most importantly, it presents
the real human struggles at the heart of a changing
South African political economy and is written from a perspective
that is sympathetic to the socially excluded.

Saul and Bond’s account of South
African history begins at the moment the
Dutch captain Jan Van Riebeeck landed
on the Cape shores in 1652, through
the assertion of English dominance,
especially intensified with the discovery
of diamonds in the Kimberly area and
gold in the Transvaal, up to the 1970s
and beyond. The discovery of gold and
diamonds transformed South Africa’s
economy in ways that were never
imagined before. Before mining, the
country was pastoral, the predominant
sector of the economy being wool and
wearing apparel in the Cape, and the
farming system fragmented. The discovery of
minerals transformed British interest in
South Africa from just being preoccupied
with securing sea lanes, with the Simons
town naval base as a flagship, to a more
commercially and politically-oriented
obsession. Kimberly and Transvaal would
turn out to become the battle grounds
of power struggle between the English
and the Boers (Afrikaners). It also laid
the seeds for what was later to become
the apartheid system under successive
Nationalist Party governments.

Conquest and dispossession of the
African population became the essential
feature of the construction of modern
South Africa and its political institutions.

Despite the Anglo-Boer War, which
lasted no more than 3 years, much of
what characterised South Africa’s social
relations was the assertion of racial
dominance over the black majority by
successive white minority governments.
Even after the end of the Anglo-Boer
war, there were intermittent tensions
between the Afrikaner political elite
and English capital over the contribution of
the major mining companies towards a
developmental strategy to build state-
driven industrialisation and empowerment
of the Afrikaner business interests. Yet
still, the two groups shared a similar view
regarding the subjugation of the black majority,
regarding them as less of a
political agency and more of a reserve labour to serve
white men’s economic needs.

The mining activities
have played a pivotal role in the structuring of
the country’s political economy up to the present.

South Africa’s spatial organisation, infrastructure, and
social relations were fundamentally determined
by the industry. Various discriminatory
laws, from the heyday of British
imperialism in the 19th century to the
emergence of official apartheid, initiated
by the Nationalist Party government in
1948, are well summarised in the work.

The work also provides a rich
historical context to introduce a complex
discussion on the emergence of a counter-
movement in the form of the African
National Congress, which is today
the governing party, and various agencies
of resistance, such as trade unions and
other civil movements. The ANC
in particular evolved as a group of largely
missionary-educated and conservative
elite that sought inclusion in the franchise.

The earlier ANC resistance was
conducted by the authors in this book has
been carried out not so much to overhaul
the political and economic template, but to
achieve reformist objectives that would,
for example, see qualified franchises
reinstated and extended nationally. Sending
deputations that expressed allegiance to
the British Queen was for some time
the ANC’s preferred method of protest.

Over a long period of time, especially
between the 1920s and the mid-1940s,
with growing political consciousness and
radical rationalisation, the organisation
would assume a broad-based appeal
and articulated universalist discourse
of rights for the African people in general.
Township unrest in the 1940s expressed
this civic sentiment, culminating
in the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and
later the banning of the ANC and other
organisations. This internment
was also shaped by the show of militancy
expressed through the black workers
strikes in the late 1940s.

The book avoids a one-sided account
of a neat path of resistance against
apartheid and capitalism; instead, it
takes a critical look at the tensions that
were present within the trade union
movement and the liberation movement
both before and during the period
in exile. Much of the historical
detail that the authors cover in this book
has been adequately discussed by
various historical or political economy
texts before. What is however fresh about
this work is the overall critical style with which it is
written. For readers who are not familiar with
this history – or who have only been exposed to
a different perspective of it – the book
is an important reference point for an
alternative analysis of South African
history. It paces through the various
phases of South African history, and tries
to cover as much ground as possible,
connecting the past and the present.

Apart from this, there are a number of
gaps in the work that are worth
highlighting. The first is that the discussion
of the early history of South Africa does not
always hang together coherently,
unpredictably, in a way that the reader
may have continued to demonstrate a
connection between the current
government in South Africa and
the evolution of the political
culture and systems in the past.
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Some assertions in this work are
weakly substantiated and rushed.
To take one example: the bold assertion
that the authors make that “…the ANC has
merely subordinated the others to its
own option of party self-preservation
and global neoliberalism’ implies that other
social movements lacked an independent
agency and self-determination and were
simply controlled by the ANC to its own
narrow agenda.

The assertion that the ANC initiated
political demobilisation could have been
buttressed by allusion to the instruments
through which the ANC accomplished such
demobilisation. Various leaders of
the United Democratic Front (UDF), and
broadly the Mass Democratic Movement,
voluntarily abandoned the path of civic
mobilisation in favour of the quasi-
omnocratic hegemonic political party that
the ANC was to become. If grassroot
activists, and leaders of the UDF,
did not acquiesce in absorption into
ANC’s chosen political strategies, they
would have simply continued or given birth to
similarly powerful social movements
that do not follow the ANC’s embrace of
parliamentary processes.

Saul and Bond over-romanticise
the UDF and grassroot movements.
It is important to point out that the
UDF was not entirely unilaterally,
various excesses were committed in

The Unfulfilled Dreams of Democracy
Mzikisi Qobo

South Africa: The Present as History by John S. Saul and Patrick Bond